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STREMII Model Application

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Abstract

This original pedagogical research describes an assignment integrated in an undergraduate crisis communication course and shares its findings. Stewart and Wilson (2016) introduced a model, STREMII (pronounced STREAM-ee), as a way to assist organizations with crisis communication via social media during a crisis event. STREMII represents a cyclical process of six interconnected elements that organizations engage in when communicating with publics: (1) social listening, (2) target audience, (3) response, (4) monitoring and evaluating, (5) interacting, and (6) implementing changes. The authors developed this model by analyzing the social media activity surrounding Hurricane Sandy in conjunction with the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and crisis phases (Coombs, 2007; 2014; Stewart and Wilson, 2016). While this is a viable framework for understanding how organizations communicate with publics via social media during a natural disaster, its effectiveness needs to be expanded within different types of crises, and tested and evaluated in practical and pedagogical contexts. Stewart and Young (2016) created this assignment for students to (a) assess an organization's social media strategies before, during, and after an organizational crisis, (b) apply the model within a variety of crisis contexts, and (c) understand the model as implemented within a crisis communication course, yielding several outcomes related to both learning, practice, and future development of the STREMII model.

Keywords: social media, social listening, crisis lifecycle, monitoring, evaluating

Social Media and Crisis Communication: Use of the STREMII Model for a Case Study Comparison

Courses: *Crisis or Risk Communication, Crisis Management, Strategic Social Media*

Objectives: *Students will apply the STREMII model's six interconnected elements, understanding and analyzing how different organizations communicate with their publics via social media before, during and after a crisis.*

Introduction

This pedagogical research report describes an assignment created for an undergraduate crisis communication course and discusses the results. The STREMI (pronounced STREAM-ee) model is introduced as a way to assist organizations with crisis communication via social media during a crisis event. STREMI represents a cyclical process of six interconnected elements that organizations participate in when communicating with publics: (1) social listening, (2) target audience, (3) responsive engagement, (4) monitoring and evaluating, (5) interacting, and (6) implementing changes (Stewart and Wilson, 2016). The model develops from the social media activity surrounding Hurricane Sandy using the framework of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 2007; 2014).

The authors desire to continually utilize, test, and evaluate the model, acknowledging the challenges set forth by the dynamic and ever-evolving nature of social media and communication technology, as well as the need to extend the model's applications, and analyses thereof, in both pedagogical and practical settings (Stewart & Wilson, 2016). Stewart and Young (2016) created this particular assignment for students to understand and assess an organization's social media strategies before, during, and after an organizational crisis event. Further, student will recognize the use of STREMI in a variety of crisis contexts, and as implemented in the context of a crisis communication course.

Rationale

To aid social responsiveness of organizations and individuals in the digital era, Stewart & Wilson (2015) designed STREMI using Coombs' (2007; 2014) Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and commonly-recognized models showcasing the phases of the crisis lifecycle. Coombs (2014), Seeger (2006), and Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (2003) identify a three-phase model, Fink (1986) presents a four step model, and Mitroff (1994) recognizes a five-stage crisis lifecycle.

Briefly, the six elements of the model correspond to a cyclical process that occurs before, during, and after a crisis. Organizations listen to what is being said about their brands on social media to respond to and interact with key audiences and influencers during a crisis situation. After messages have been posted to carefully identified target audiences on Twitter, Facebook, or other social media platforms, the companies then monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the messages, gather feedback and implement necessary changes. Stewart and Wilson (2015) acknowledge that the model needs:

real-world application and scholarly analysis using case studies to assess the quality and validity of the proposed

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model . . . [to] determine if STREMII will hold up in an actual crisis scenario [and] in which types of crises it proves to be most effective, and where the weaknesses or gaps exist in the framework (p. 8)

Furthermore, Sokuvitz & Perkins (2015) argue for a pedagogical approach to teaching crisis communication, “using originally-designed cases to prepare organizational leaders for managing crisis communications” (p. 27).

What follows is a case study comparison assignment created for an undergraduate crisis communication course designed to address these stated needs in the existing research. We will briefly describe, appraise and debrief the assignment, and offer some concluding remarks.

Description/Explanation of the Assignment

Preparation/Preliminary steps:

Preparing for this assignment, students need to be familiar with social media, crisis communication, and the stages of a crisis. Core concepts covered in lecture or discussion include: best practices for crisis communication, communication theories (image restoration, apologia, etc.), phases of a crisis lifecycle, social media (cause or solution), writing social media messages, and social media strategies. See the references page for a list of preliminary readings.

Materials Needed:

To complete this assignment, students will need: (1) access to the Internet, Twitter, Facebook and analytic sites such as Brandwatch, Sprout, and Hootsuite to conduct research, (2) a collaborative space to work, (3) and software to create a presentation.

Assignment:

This assignment was created for a crisis communication course with a class size of 22 students, a 75-minute class period, and encompasses a two to three week time period. It can be easily adjusted for larger classes or shorter class periods or lengths of time. In the first class period, students are divided into small groups (specifically and purposely, groups of six in our case). Each member of the group is assigned to one of the six elements of the STREMII model. The small groups can range between three and six students, with modifications to the number of STREMII elements assigned per students. The groups are instructed to choose a crisis (recent or currently unfolding) where social media was used by organizations to communicate with audiences. Each group should choose a different type of crisis to study; for example, technological, food, environmental or natural disasters, transportation, financial, death and injury, product tampering, reputation management, etc.

The following class period, groups are instructed to read assigned articles/chapters including the original work containing the STREMI model by Stewart & Wilson (2016), come prepared to discuss the readings, and answer any questions specific to the elements of the model. Students may encounter difficulty in distinguishing between social listening, monitoring and surveillance, so class discussion should focus on this in particular.

At this time, the students are given two weeks to research their chosen crises, employing the STREMI model with these questions as a guide:

- Who are/were the target audiences? How are/were they targeted, and by whom?
- With what social media platform—Facebook, Twitter, etc.?
- What messages are/were sent out, and what messages are/were responded to, **before** (triggering event), **during**, and **after** the crisis event?
- Describe the social media conversation happening. How did the organization survey the landscape, and how did the organization listen to the social media conversations?
- How did organizations monitor the landscape of this conversation and evaluate outcomes? How did organizations interact with consumers/publics before, during, and after the event?
- What changes would you recommend for changes to be implemented?

Providing a concise analysis of the crisis, students are required to explain all the STREMI model elements with specific social media examples from their crisis and summarize what was learned/observed/analyzed, in a 10-15 minute professional presentation.

Debriefing

Once presentations have been completed, the whole class engages in a discussion/debriefing about applying this model and lessons learned about social media crisis communication. More specifically, students are asked to note any communication differences between organizations. For example, in the crisis communication course where this assignment was implemented, one group chose Protein World, international protein supplement company, and its progressive ad campaign that was aggressively launched in the New York and London. The campaign, primarily featuring thin female models in bikinis, created a crisis for non-users of the company's products who were unhappy with the portrayal of women. Joseph (2015), a contributor to the global media platform *The Drum*, cites activist Adrielle Munger:

These advertisements are not just offending or insulting us, but oppressing us by creating a hugely pervasive climate of sexualizing women — especially in New York City, where the ads are as loud as the male street harassers . . . ‘Their ads

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are just another addition to the barrage of oppressive media and advertisements that create a climate of harassment towards women and our bodies' (Joseph, 2015).

The student's analysis of Protein World uncovered that the organization did not follow the best practices of image repair identified by Kathleen Fearn-Banks (2011): "In this theory, the organization determines what is threatening reputation or image and also determines which publics must be addressed and persuaded to maintain and restore positive image" (p. 52). Rather than attempting to restore a positive image, an organizational representative interacted with affected individuals (who were referred to as feminists) tweeting a particular follower "had a lot of issues before she saw the PW ad" and "sales have tripled and the PR department has got a bonus."

How Protein World listened, monitored, and responded to the social media comments was in direct opposition to Chipotle's response to customers during its contamination crisis. Chipotle's social media responses aligned more closely with best practices, evidenced by the following posts by Shane (2015): "We take safety very seriously and you should feel safe eating in our restaurants" and "We closed some stores in the Pacific NW out of caution and are working with the health department to determine the cause." To conclude the students submitted a short (two page) reflective journal assessing the STREMI model and its usefulness in understanding an organization's social media strategies.

Appraisal

Based on the reflective journals, students identified several strengths and challenges of the model. Thematically, the students liked the model overall, but were challenged by semantics and perceived overlap between steps.

While I understand why the model was so loosely defined, it makes it hard to apply it to real world issues. For instance, before we could even apply the model, we had to have a very long talk about what each step meant and how it affect [sic] another. This process is good for learning, but not good for real world scenarios that require quick reactions.

Students experienced difficulty in distinguishing difference between traditional media (press releases) and social media (posts and tweets). From their perspective, all media is social:

I am concerned that the phrase "social media" is changing too rapidly for there not to be an intended definition associated with this model. While we were working, my group and I were unsure where "social media" began and where it stopped. Furthermore, my group was unsure

whether or not we were only investigating social media and the crisis, or if we could include sources that weren't social media related. We ultimately felt restricted by the idea of only using social media.

Lastly, students connected inherently with the immense challenge communication practitioners have in capturing and analyzing the information gathered in the six elements within ongoing and unfolding crisis in Flint Michigan:

The [water] crisis is ongoing and widespread so our information was constantly evolving as we were trying to conduct a coherent analysis

The model was not tailored for a crisis such as this . . . [we] understood that the elements would go in numerical order. Later on [we] figured out that crises don't always work out in this numerical order and can actually back track.

Conclusion

In closing, this assignment served dual purposes of providing lucrative feedback on the STREMI model, while simultaneously affording students the opportunity to scrutinize the role of social media throughout a variety of crisis cases, yielding several key takeaways.

First, students' experience with and assessment of the assignment reinforces Stewart and Wilson's (2016) original supposition that ongoing opportunity exists for the STREMI model to develop through continued pedagogical evaluations and real world applications. Second, outcomes of this exercise demonstrate an awareness of technological determinism (McLuhan, 1962) with regard to social media and potential need to advance towards a more versatile and dynamic model design for application in modern crisis communication. Lastly, findings suggest an increased need to address the model's linearity. For example, in a real-world scenario, phases of the STREMI model must be fully vetted *prior* to the crisis in order to allow for real-time delivery *during* the actual crisis events. Crises are not time-bound; therefore, STREMI should evolve to account for both immediate and long-range application of its elements on social media throughout a crisis. Students and researchers realized several elements may be continuous and ongoing throughout the crisis event, such as social listening and engagement, further supporting the challenges to forming the model as a time-bound or lock-step sequence, rather than a continuous one, especially among certain phases of the process.

The revelation that the assignment is "good for learning" each of the elements prior to any application, ongoing use of STREMI as a social media crisis communication model is encouraged. Additional application of the

model in practical and pedagogical arenas, especially as social media platforms and features evolve, invites an opportunity for a better understanding of the model's effectiveness and areas that need further development, as well as its nuances among various crisis types. For now, the STREMII model provides a starting point for considerations to guide the use of social media in crisis communication.

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Appendix A: Six Interconnected Elements of the STREMI Model (Stewart & Wilson, 2016)

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